

Left Behind: Why Democrats Lost the Working Class

Dejados atrás: por qué los demócratas perdieron a la clase trabajadora

Sebastián Royo

Key words

Working Class

- US Elections
- Democratic Party
- Party Realignment
- Woke

Palabras clave

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- Elecciones Estados Unidos
- Partido Demócrata
- Realineamiento de partidos
- Woke

Abstract

The victory of Donald Trump and the Republican Party in the November 2024 presidential elections in the United States rested on the support of a new electoral coalition that included a segment of the working class, which had traditionally supported the Democratic Party. This article analyzes the reasons behind the defection of the working class from the Democratic Party. It shows that this realignment has been a decades-long process resulting from the impact of structural changes in the economy on the industrial working class. These changes led the party to broaden its electoral base and attract other voters, particularly college graduates, who have pushed it to adopt policies that have alienated segments of the working class.

Resumen

La victoria de Donald Trump y del Partido Republicano en las elecciones presidenciales de noviembre de 2024 en Estados Unidos se ha sustentado en el apoyo de una nueva coalición electoral de la que ha sido parte un sector de la clase trabajadora, que tradicionalmente apoyaba al Partido Demócrata. Este artículo analiza las razones que han llevado a un sector de la clase trabajadora a abandonar al Partido Demócrata. Muestra que ese abandono ha sido un proceso de décadas y consecuencia del impacto en la clase trabajadora industrial de cambios estructurales en la economía, que llevaron al partido a tratar de ampliar su base electoral y atraer a otros votantes, particularmente los graduados universitarios que han empujado al partido a adoptar políticas que han alienado a un sector de la clase trabajadora.

Citation

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Sebastián Royo: Clark University (Massachusetts, EE. UU.) | sroyo@clarku.edu



INTRODUCTION

The victory of Donald Trump and the Republican Party in the November 2024 presidential elections in the United States (USA) confirmed the triumph of conservative populism, which has placed new priorities on immigration, energy, trade, national sovereignty, security, and opposition to a politically correct (or “woke”) left. This victory was built on the support of a new electoral coalition that included a segment of the working class, which had traditionally supported the Democratic Party. In this election, the Democrats lost millions of working-class voters who had historically formed part of their electoral base. Over time, the party has increasingly become associated with professionals and the highly educated, while the Republican Party now represents a more multiethnic working class.

The combined processes of globalization, deindustrialization, and technological change in recent decades have reduced the Democratic Party’s industrial working-class base and weakened the unions that were instrumental in linking the party to that base. In response, the party was compelled to broaden its electoral coalition and attract other voters, particularly college graduates. As the share of college graduates has increased (e.g., in 1952, 5 % of voters were college graduates, compared to 41 % in 2020), they have gained greater influence within the Democratic Party. This has contributed to the diffusion of increasingly liberal cultural norms, pushing the party to adopt their interests, priorities, and values on issues such as race, religion, war, the environment, firearms, trade, immigration, sexuality, crime, and social welfare programs. This has moved the party further to the left, slowly but inexorably alienating its traditional working-class base. The Democratic Party (as well as many other left-

wing parties in other countries) has been captured by what Thomas Piketty (2020) refers to as the “Brahmin left”, and has adopted a more affluent, educated form of progressivism that emphasizes social issues and cultural identity rather than economic class. As a result, over the past few decades, an increasing number of voters from the traditional working-class base have defected from the Democratic Party and moved toward the Republican Party. This party has capitalized on this discontent by appealing to working-class voters who had traditionally supported the Democrats. These voters have become increasingly alienated by the policies and perceived excesses of the new left.

Party systems are the manifestation of political conflicts in democratic societies and are central to shaping a country’s political structure. A political realignment involves a series of changes in party ideology or electoral support that replace a dominant coalition and lead to a restructuring of the party system that can last for decades. This article analyzes the reasons behind the defection of a segment of the working class from the Democratic Party to the Republicans in order to determine the nature of a potential realignment of the US party system. This system has undergone unprecedented transformations over recent decades. The article questions whether Trump’s victory represents a realignment of the US political system toward populist conservatism based on a new electoral coalition. This coalition departs from the traditional class struggle of the industrial era and the entrenched left-right ideological spectrum. A party system with clear and stable electoral alignments contributes to a functioning democracy by channeling the citizen and voter conflicts and preferences. Therefore, analyzing the causes of these changes has major implications for a country’s political stability and economic prosperity.

The article concludes that, despite the undeniable victory of conservative populism, it is too early to confirm a realignment. On the one hand, the working class exodus from the Democratic Party has been building for years, and a potential realignment reflects a process that began decades ago, long before Trump's first election in 2016. On the other hand, the margin of victory was very narrow, and the country remains deeply divided. The coming years will be crucial. The durability of this new political landscape will determine whether the electoral realignment endures and whether a new era is beginning in which conservative populism becomes the dominant force in US politics.

From a methodological standpoint, given that the central premise of this article is that the 2024 phenomenon is not an isolated event but the culmination of a decades-long process, this study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, using a socio-historical design that links macroeconomic changes (de-industrialization) with micro-level political changes (voter behavior). It seeks not only to measure voting outcomes in the 2024 election, but also to understand the "whys" and "hows" of the shift in political identity. The analysis extends beyond a simple description of the change, aiming to determine its causes (alienation, structural changes, class identity) and to explore how party elites have become disconnected from their traditional base and how this reflects broader power relations.

LITERATURE

This article falls within the literature on party system evolution and realignment, and it analyzes structural and behavioral dynamics (Bornschieer, 2009). On the one hand, some scholars have linked social cleavages to party systems and ar-

gue that these structural realignments are driven by macro-social transformations that reshape the composition of the electorate, including divisions based on class, culture, status, education, religion, and generation (Rose and Urwin, 1969; Raymond, 2011). According to these authors, changes in social structure are linked to changes in party support, and realignments occur as new social divisions replace older ones. Other researchers, however, have argued that such social divisions have become less relevant to partisanship in many countries. They suggest that behavioral realignments are not the result of changes in voters' social conditions, but rather that voters' attitudes and behaviors are increasingly influenced by coherent ideologies detached from their social circumstances (Franklin, 1992; Goldberg, 2020).

The alienation of the White working class in the United States and the collapse of the "American Dream" have also been widely analyzed. Frank (2004) examines the rise of populist and anti-elitist conservatism in the United States, focusing on the case of Kansas. According to his analysis, political discourse has shifted in recent decades from questions of social and economic equality to more "explosive" cultural issues, such as abortion and same-sex marriage. These issues have been used to redirect working-class anger —traditionally aligned with the Democratic Party— toward "liberal elites" and the Republican vote. Frank suggests that this explains the rise of political conservatism in Kansas, a historically progressive state. Packer (2013) describes the "unraveling" of a social contract according to which, if one worked hard and was a good citizen, the American Dream was attainable. It was possible to have a secure life and provide one's children with the opportunity for a better one. Packer illustrates the decline of the institutions

that underpinned this contract, such as labor unions and public schools. He shows how this “void” has been filled by “organized money”, which has eroded the nation’s shared identity and commitment to equality, leading to working class alienation and a broader crisis of democracy in the US. Leonhardt (2023) examines the history of the modern American economy in search of an explanation for the rise and subsequent fall of the American dream, framing it as an ongoing struggle between two competing forms of capitalism: one that delivers broad-based prosperity and another that prioritizes individual gain and benefits the wealthy. Leonhardt describes how democratic capitalism flourished, making the American dream possible until the last decades of the twentieth century, when, little by little, the dream disintegrated to serve only a privileged few. Isenberg (2016) examines class in the United States and offers a cultural history of shifting notions of class and social inferiority, showing that the voters who propelled Trump to the White House have long been a persistent feature of the country’s social and economic fabric since the founding of the republic. Hochschild (2016) analyzes the perspectives of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana who have reacted against changes in the United States over recent decades. These supporters perceive a situation in which women, immigrants, and racial minorities are “jumping the line” to achieve the American dream, while Democratic governments advance the interests of those groups through affirmative action programs and other types of support. As a result of these perceptions, Tea Party supporters, mostly White and disproportionately male, increasingly feel like “strangers in their own land”. Finally, in his autobiography, Vice President J. D. Vance (2016) describes how the dominant hillbilly culture of Appalachia fosters so-

cial disintegration and economic insecurity and helps explain the abandonment of the Democratic Party by White workers. Pierson and Schickler (2024) analyze how the combined effect of economic change, technological transformation and shifts in federal government power has led to a re-configuration of state party systems. The result has been an increased risk of conflict and intensified polarization, enabling the emergence of an authoritarian current within the Republican Party. The common thread running through all these analyses is institutional weakening, which has contributed to the breakdown of the American Dream and facilitated the rise of conservative populism.

This article examines how structural and behavioral changes help explain the realignment of working-class voters in the US in the context of the 2024 elections. In the United States, new political divisions may be in the process of consolidation, potentially leading to lasting electoral shifts. Although the study focuses on a single case study —the 2024 US elections— and it would be premature to draw definitive theoretical conclusions, the outcome of these elections may mark the beginning of a historical process that could produce new, stable party coalitions and alignments. These alignments may be associated with new political preferences and commitments and may signal deeper and potentially more difficult-to-resolve ideological divisions. If this realignment is confirmed, it could have significant implications for party strategies, political leaders, and policymaking.

THE TRIUMPH OF TRUMP

Did Trump achieve a landslide victory that confirms a realignment? Despite a perception that Trump’s victory was overwhelming, which would support the idea

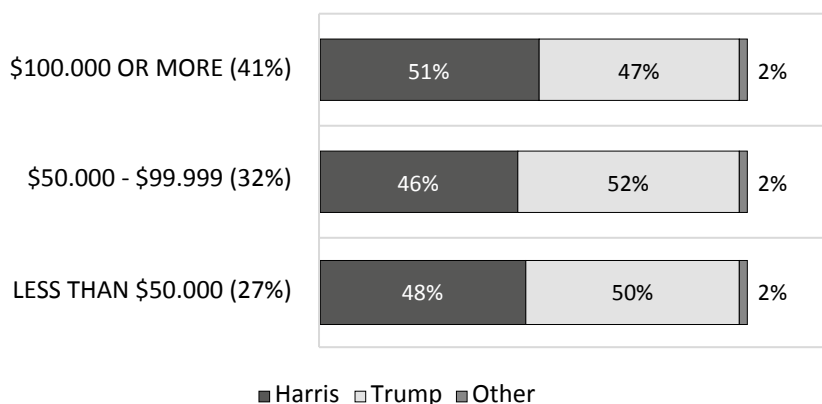
of a realignment, the data offer a far more nuanced picture (Jacobson, 2024). Trump won both the Electoral College (312 votes to Harris's 226) and the popular vote: 77 303 573 votes (49.9 %) for Trump compared to 75 019 257 votes (48.4 %) for Harris. He also became only the second Republican —along with George W. Bush— to win the popular vote since 1988. Moreover, Trump carried all the key swing states —Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin— by an aggregate margin of 760 000 votes, while Harris performed worse in these states than Biden had four years earlier.

Exit polls also reveal that Trump garnered the support of 66 % of White working-class voters. While Democratic candidate Kamala Harris won the vote of Americans earning over \$100 000, Trump prevailed among those earning less than \$50 000 (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, according to a report by Pew Research, Biden won approximately 27 % of White voters without university degrees in 2020, as compared to almost 60 % of Bill Clinton's White non-college-educated supporters twenty-eight years earlier (Cohn, 2021). This largely explains Trump's victories in 2016 and 2024. According to an exit poll conducted by NBC News, voters with a bachelor's degree or advanced university studies made up 43 % of the electorate in the November 2024 election. Of that group, 56 % voted for Vice President Kamala Harris and 42 % voted for Donald Trump (see Figure 2). This result is consistent with a decades-long trend: the realignment of American politics along cultural and educational lines, away from the class- and income-based divisions that structured the two-party system for much of the twentieth century.

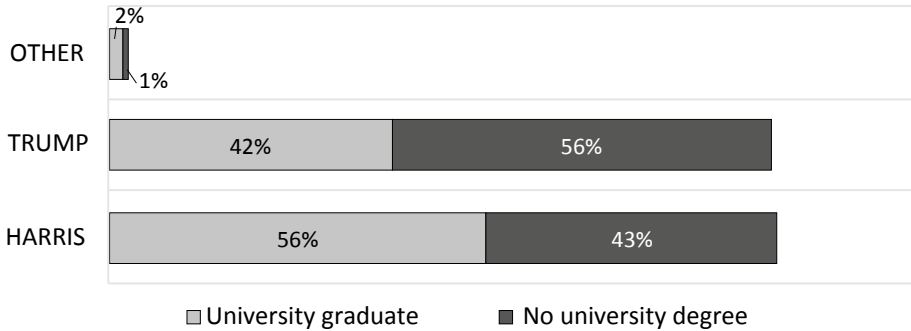
However, the Republican victory is far from constituting a tectonic shift. If we consider the percentage difference between the two candidates, Trump's margin of victory was very modest. Not only did he fail to surpass the 50 % threshold, but he won by only 1.62 points. To put this in perspective, Trump's victory was smaller than that of any popular vote winner since Bush in 2000, whose margin was 0.51 %, and it represents the fourth narrowest presidential victory since 1960 (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 1. *Total household income for 2023*



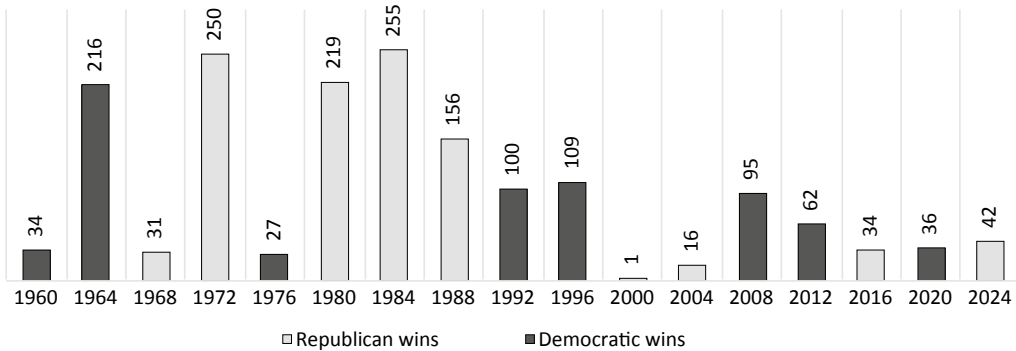
Source: Author's own creation based on NBC News.

FIGURE 2. *What is the highest level of education you completed?*



Source: Author's own creation based on NBC News.

FIGURE 3. *By how much did the winner of the Electoral College vote exceed the minimum number of votes required to win?*

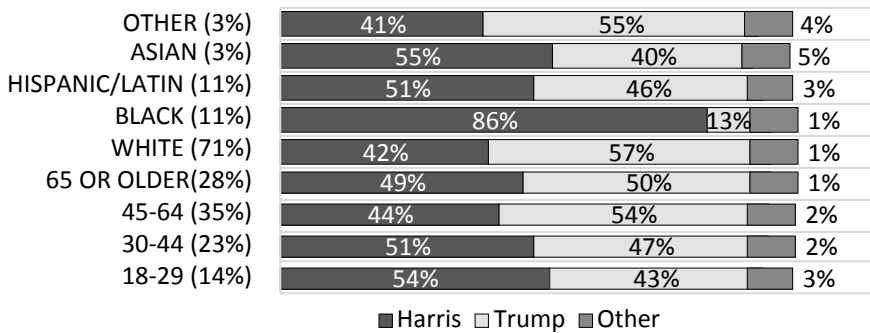


Source: National Archives.

Despite the narrowness of his victory, however, the overall perception was one of a decisive win and a political turning point, and these perceptions are relevant. In addition to improving his performance among the working-class voters, Trump also gained support among younger voters and minorities. He won 43 % of voters aged 18 to 29, 7 points higher than in 2020, and approximately 46 % of Hispanic voters, compared to 32 % in the 2020 election. Approximately 3 out of 10 black men under the age of 45 voted for Trump, double the number in 2020. Of non-white voters without college degrees, Trump's share of the vote increased by 8 points (see Figure 4). Furthermore,

some of his biggest gains occurred in and around major cities, areas that were previously essential for Democratic victories.

On the other hand, unlike in 2016, a growing perception exists in the country that the elites of the future —crypto entrepreneurs, Musk/Tesla, Bezos/Amazon, Zuckerberg/Meta, among others— have supported Trump. He has also received strong support from the corporate world resentful of regulations, pressures toward self-censorship, diversity policies, and expectations that businesses act as agents of social change. Finally, and even more troubling for Democrats, there is a growing perception that the cultural climate —particularly against the so-called

FIGURE 4. *What age group do you belong to? What is your race or ethnicity?*

Source: Author's own creation based on NBC News.

“woke” ideology, immigrants, diversity policies, and gender reassignment— has shifted in favor of the Republicans. In short, although the election results do not suggest that voters seek a sharp turn to the right, Trump’s victory is widely perceived as reflecting, at least in part, a backlash against the Democratic Party and the culture of the past four years. At the same time, Republicans appear to hold the cultural momentum (Klein, 2025). Even more troubling for Democrats is the loss of support among working-class voters and minorities that have historically formed a key part of their electoral coalition.

THE WORKING-CLASS DEFECTION FROM THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

The alienation of working-class voters from the Democratic Party became more evident with Donald Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016 and was further confirmed in the most recent elections with Kamala Harris’s defeat in November 2024. However, this loss of support is not a recent phenomenon. The Democratic Party’s abandonment of the working class began decades ago (Weisman, 2025). Barack Obama’s victory in the 2008 elec-

tion, in the context of the 2007 financial crisis and the Iraq War—which had discredited Republican policies based on smaller government, deregulation, and a neoconservative foreign policy— appeared to mark the beginning of a new era of Democratic electoral dominance. This perception was reinforced by demographic changes in the US, particularly the projected growth of voters of color, younger voters, and secular voters. However, as Weisman points out, those expectations were not fulfilled. On the contrary, Obama’s reelection marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new political phase defined by Trump’s conservative populism. Until then, the differences between the two parties had been quite clear: Republicans received support from the most conservative and affluent sectors of society, as well as from the religious right, and championed fiscal conservatism, free markets, family values, a limited role for the state in the economy, free trade, small governments, and realist foreign policy. Democrats, for their part, represented the working class, minorities, and more progressive sectors of society. They advocated an active role for the state in the economy and as an agent of social change, supporting social and redistributive policies as well as a hu-

man-rights-based foreign policy. Despite these differences, there was, nevertheless, room for consensus and cooperation between the two parties on issues such as foreign policy, free trade, and even immigration.

All of this changed after 2016 with Trump's capture of the Republican Party, which shattered the Reagan-era consensus. Trump adopted the mantle of conservative populism and positioned himself as an agent of change. He launched sustained attacks on political and economic elites whom he accused of using democratic and transnational institutions to advance their own interests at the expense of the working class and ordinary citizens. He prioritized the protection of US jobs, energy production, infrastructure spending, tax cuts, and selected social policies, while opposing immigration and free trade. At the same time, he criticized US interventionist foreign policy and denounced the excesses of the "politically correct" or "woke" liberal left. Meanwhile, Democrats increasingly came to be identified with the political establishment, deregulation, equality and diversity policies, free trade and immigration, supply-side policies to address energy and housing problems, and interventionist, alliance-based foreign policies. They also became increasingly influenced by college-educated progressive activists whose cultural and economic views and priorities often alienate working-class voters. Ultimately, Democrats moved away from their core message of supporting the working class and lost voters whom they had long taken for granted as part of their electoral base (Cohn, 2024).

This realignment of the two parties' political platforms has led to the formation of new electoral coalitions. Since Barack Obama's presidency, American voting preferences have undergone a significant reversal: Democrats have increas-

ingly become the party of professionals and the highly educated, while Republicans have come to represent a multiethnic working class. As noted above, Democrats have experienced a 30-point drop in support among the nonwhite working class. As Cohn (2024) points out:

The gap between white and people of color voters is now smaller than at any time since the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The partisan generation gap has shrunk by two-thirds [...] and the old class division between rich and poor, between capital and labor, has seemingly disappeared.

The gap between voters with and without a college degree is now as large as the income gap was in 2012. If there was ever any doubt, the results of this latest election have shattered the progressive assumption that demographic change would ensure a lasting Democratic majority and that voters of color would remain solidly Democratic. Harris improved on Biden's 2020 performance with only one group: White college graduates.

The resentment and alienation of White workers began long before Democrats supported policies such as gender-neutral bathrooms. In fact, as Cohn (2024) notes, the decline of the class struggle that characterized the industrial era had already begun in the 1950s and 1960s:

When postwar wealth and an expanded safety net largely satisfied a century of demands from industrial workers. Shortly thereafter, the emergence of a new generation of young, college-educated activists helped bring to the forefront a new set of issues —from civil rights and women's rights to Vietnam— that contributed to the breakdown of the New Deal coalition.

Moreover, some Democratic Party leaders had already anticipated this decades earlier. In his speech to the Democratic Leadership Council, following the

party's landslide defeat in the 1994 midterms, Robert Reich warned that since the 1980s, many US workers had not benefited from the economic recovery. He argued that this was generating resentment and division within US society, between a more highly educated class with access to good jobs, higher wages, and better life prospects, and those without higher education, who were being left behind. Reich referred to these workers as "the anxious class" and concluded his speech by calling for the "restoration of the middle class" in the US (Reich, 2015; Weisman, 2025).

A study conducted at Harvard University on the economic mobility of two cohorts—one consisting of Generation X (born in 1978) and the other of Millennials (born in 1992)—confirms that White working-class Americans are falling behind. The study shows that Black Millennials born to low-income parents found it easier to rise to the middle and upper classes than the previous Black generation, while White Millennials born to poor parents have had more difficulty rising to the middle and upper classes than their White Generation X counterparts. The study shows that Black Americans continue to earn less than White Americans and that the overall income gap remains large. However, it also confirms that the gap has narrowed by approximately 30 % among White and Black Americans born into low-income families. This report suggests that the White advantage is no longer as large as it once was, that economic mobility can change relatively quickly, and that social class is becoming more important in the United States, while race is becoming less so (Chetty *et al.*, 2024).

How did we get to this point? Since World War II, the US has led a global economic order based on free trade, supported by supranational alliances and in-

stitutions to advance that agenda. The gold standard provided stability and greater autonomy for national governments, but the economic crisis of the 1970s and Reagan's rise to power in 1980 marked a shift toward neoliberal policies and the beginning of an era characterized by financialization, deregulation, free trade, tax cuts, and weakened unions, all of which contributed to rising inequality (Stein, 2011). Despite the traditional consensus among economists—adopted by both parties and now increasingly questioned—that free trade improves overall welfare, some scholars have long argued that this is only true insofar as winners compensate losers (Walter, 2010), which has not occurred. This was not an accidental decision. As Mishel (2016) states:

Ignoring the losers was deliberate... if free trade advocates had truly cared about the working class, they could have supported a full range of policies to underpin robust wage growth: full employment, collective bargaining, high labor standards, a strong minimum wage, etc.

However, as early as 1981, the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program was among the first targets of the Reagan administration, which reduced its weekly compensation payments. The damage continued under subsequent Democratic administrations, and much of it could have been mitigated "before administering shocks" through expanded trade with low-wage countries. Ultimately, according to Mishel, American workers have been "betrayed by a bipartisan elite to whom many economists provide intellectual cover". Therefore, it is unsurprising that, given the limitations of the safety net, opposition to international trade and free trade agreements has gained significant political traction in the US today.

Democrats have been largely associated with policies that have contributed

to a loss of support among the working class, as they have also been strong advocates of free trade and welfare state reforms that, in many cases, have weakened the social safety net (Weisman, 2025). After losing three consecutive presidential elections and spending twelve years out of the White House, the party's more moderate wing argued that, in order to regain the presidency, Democrats needed to move away from liberal egalitarianism, which had been the party's central premise for decades, and shift toward the center. This repositioning was framed around a "third way" approach that sought to combine elements of neoliberal and social democratic economic policy: a less interventionist, market-oriented system on the one hand, and Keynesian-style public spending and social protection on the other. Bill Clinton was the leading exponent of this perspective as a founder and one of the early presidents of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), a key organization in the party's modernization and the articulation of the "Third Way". During his presidency, he implemented these policies, most notably concluding and signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which eliminated tariff barriers between Mexico, the United States, and Canada. While this agreement increased trade among the three countries, it has also been associated with the displacement of U.S. manufacturing jobs to Mexico. Clinton also spearheaded the normalization of trade relations with China and its accession to the World Trade Organization, a decision that was widely considered to have profound consequences for millions of American workers when China flooded the U.S. market with lower-cost goods and contributing to the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs and wage pressures (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson, 2016). According to this study,

the shock led to a 1.54 percentage point decline in the manufacturing employment-to-population ratio, with only limited offsetting gains in other sectors. This resulted in persistently high unemployment and reduced labor force participation for more than a decade. It was also Clinton who pledged to "end the welfare system as we know it", negotiating with Republicans and signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), which imposed new requirements for welfare recipients. Finally, Clinton also signed the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933, which had separated commercial and investment banking in order to protect commercial banks from riskier financial activities and reduce conflicts of interest that had contributed to the speculative excesses prior to the Great Depression. He did so despite the opposition of experts who warned —correctly, as confirmed by the 2007 financial crisis— that the deregulation of Wall Street would eventually destabilize the country's financial system. His final major legacy was the balanced budgets and record surpluses of the late 1990s, which did little to address the immediate challenges faced by workers affected by globalization, technological change, and free trade. These surpluses were later used by the Bush administration to finance military interventions, rather than being directed toward domestic redistribution or labor-market adjustment. His Democratic successor, Barack Obama (after the eight years of George W. Bush), was no exception. During his presidency, he expanded health insurance with the so-called "Obamacare", and implemented other progressive policies aimed at supporting workers, including the 2009 bailout of the automotive industry, new regulations on Wall Street designed to prevent another financial crisis, and the creation

of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Obama negotiated the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which aimed at a 90 % reduction in all tariffs among member countries by January 1, 2006, and the gradual elimination of remaining tariffs by 2015 (ultimately the United States did not ratify the agreement after the Trump administration decided not to proceed with it). More controversial, for many observers, was his decision not to pursue criminal prosecutions against those responsible for the financial crisis, whom he referred to as the “fat cats”. This not only generated enormous resentment among millions of people who lost everything during the crisis but also reinforced the perception that the system was biased in favor of the wealthiest and that the government was unresponsive to their concerns. The effects of these policies have been devastating for millions of workers and their families. As Weisman (2025) describes, Democratic policies “focused on people as consumers rather than as workers”. They were based on the expectation that rising tides would lift all boats, with displaced workers finding comparable opportunities elsewhere. However, this approach underestimated the constraints faced by workers in deindustrialized regions and the limited investment in those areas. According to Jared Bernstein, chair of President Biden’s Council of Economic Advisers, there was a:

Disregard for the importance of work, the dignity of work [...] Forty people might have lost their jobs in a factory, but 100 000 people in the community had lower prices. The calculation seemed obvious. But the calculation was wrong (Weisman, 2025).

Ultimately, many workers who had demonstrated resilience throughout the major crises of the early 21st century (from 9/11 and the Iraq War to the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic)

reached a point of no return in their frustration, disillusionment, and resentment. And Trump proved to be a master at exploiting this sentiment.

BIDEN’S FAILURE

In the context of the perceived abandonment of the working class, the question remains whether Trump’s victory represents an isolated and temporary phenomenon driven by specific circumstances. These include the incumbent’s age and his late withdrawal from the campaign, as well as concerns over inflation, immigration, crime, and transgender rights. Alternatively, it may reflect a broader realignment in which a growing number of White working-class voters, as well as Black, Hispanic, and Asian American workers, have become alienated from the Democratic Party, perceiving it as dominated by economic and educational elites. In other words, the 2024 election reveals that:

US politics are currently undergoing a slow realignment in which a disproportionately large group of relatively well-educated White voters have been able to reshape partisan alignment in the United States, such that those with a college education have become increasingly Democratic while those without degrees have become more Republican (Edsall, 2024).

A concerning factor for Democrats is the limited success of President Biden’s economic initiatives in regaining working-class support. Joe Biden, a pragmatic and progressive politician who is not from an elite background, but was raised in a small, deindustrialized town, Scranton, Pennsylvania —where he has maintained his “Scranton Joe” identity— appeared to understand that working-class voters were increasingly abandoning the Democratic Party. During his presidency, he sought to reverse some

of the damage done by his predecessors. Biden acknowledged that neoliberal policies had caused harm to millions of American workers: incomes for most families had stagnated or grown only slowly, while indicators such as life satisfaction, birth rates, or life expectancy had declined (Leonhardt, 2023). All of this contributed to Trump's electoral success in 2016 and 2024 (Royo, 2017, 2023). In response, Biden moved away from the dominant neoliberal paradigm of previous decades, arguing that the federal government should play a more active role both in supporting vulnerable groups and in regulating the private sector. This approach became known as "Bidenomics", opposing trade liberalization and maintaining the tariffs that Trump had imposed on China during his first term. He also developed an industrial policy aimed at strengthening sectors deemed critical to national security, such as semiconductors, and to sustainability, such as clean energy. His administration was more aggressive than those of his predecessors in restricting corporate power, blocking mergers, challenging monopolies and abuses of market power, eliminating "hidden and opaque" fees on services and purchases, and regulating prescription drug prices.

One of the key paradoxes of the election result is that, despite presenting himself as a champion of workers and implementing policies intended to help them, Biden became the Democratic president under whom the party experienced significant losses of working-class support, even though he left a substantial legacy for his successor. The US economy is widely regarded as the strongest of the advanced world. According to IMF data, the United States recorded the strongest economic growth among the seven major industrialized countries in 2023 and was projected to rank first again in 2024. Em-

ployment has increased from 57.4 % in 2020 to 59.85 % in 2024. More than sixteen million jobs were created during his four years in office, and nominal wages increased by 19.2 % between November 2020 and September 2024. Industrial employment also grew to nearly thirteen million workers, while the unemployment rate stands at a near-historic low of 4.2 %, broadly in line with pre-pandemic levels. Even inflation, widely identified as a key factor in the electoral defeat, had moderated to 2.7 % (Royo, 2025a).

Furthermore, from a legislative perspective, Biden achieved several major policy milestones, such as the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan (ARP) that provided American citizens financial support to households during the pandemic crisis; the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill, which enabled substantial investment in deteriorated infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and broadband networks; the \$2.2 trillion Inflation Reduction Act, the largest climate policy package in US history; and the \$280 billion CHIPS and Science Act, designed to strengthen the United States' position in the production of semiconductors and other advanced technology products. These initiatives were designed to benefit the working class. For example, the pandemic relief plan resulted in the largest job recovery ever recorded: more than 12 million jobs have been added, the largest two-year total in US history.

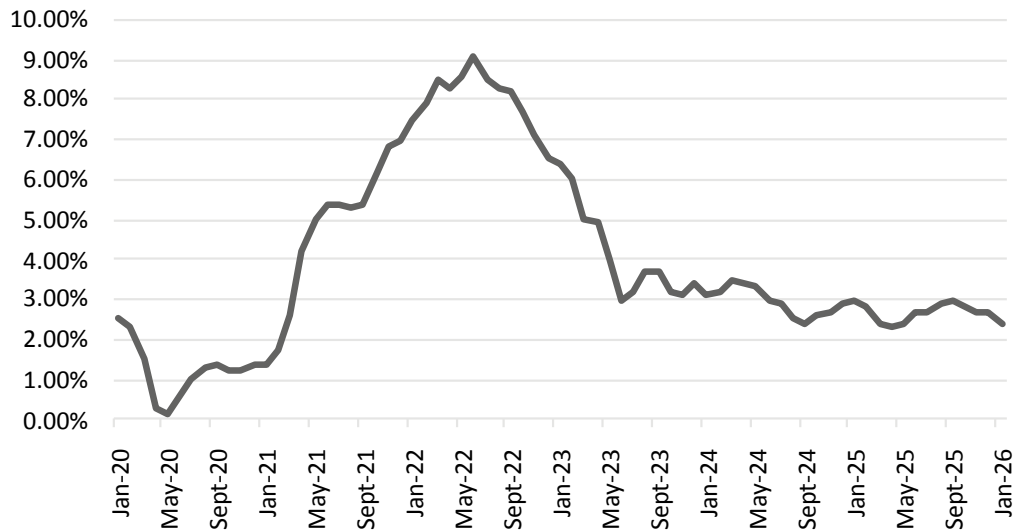
However, these economic successes did little to improve Harris's electoral prospects, as the recovery was accompanied by the highest rate of inflation in decades (see Figure 5), peaking at over 9 %. Although it had since declined to 2.4 %, inflation had a significant impact on household finances, contributed to Biden's declining popularity, and played an important role in the election. Approximately two-thirds of voters considered

the US economy to be in poor condition, and approximately 46 % reported that their family’s financial situation was worse than four years earlier (NBC News, 2024).

Besides inflation, another major issue—and a significant factor in his electoral defeat— was immigration. Biden was unable to pass comprehensive immigration

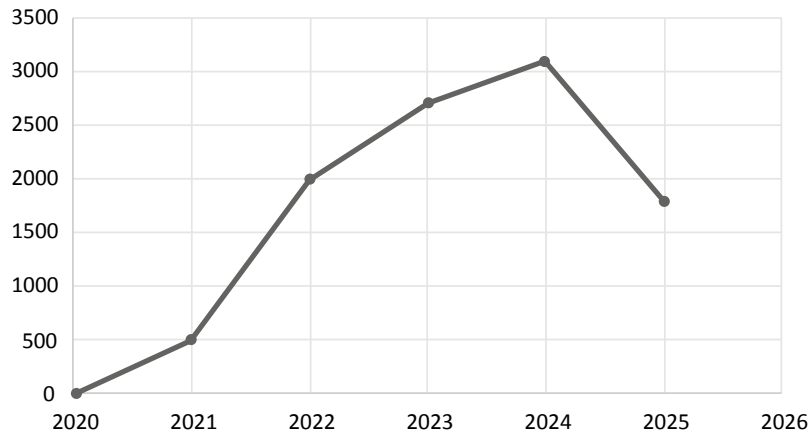
reform, due in part to Trump’s lobbying. According to data from the Congressional Budget Office, it is estimated that during his term, the net annual migration averaged 2.4 million people between 2021 and 2023, and total net migration over the four years exceeded eight million people (see Figure 6). This volume of migration placed significant pressure on local and state gov-

FIGURE 5. *Inflation (2020-2025)*



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

FIGURE 6. *Immigrants not born in the US (2021-2025, in thousands)*



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

ernment resources and led to highly chaotic situations that Republicans exploited to attack Harris. Inflation and immigration were key to understanding the working class's shift away from the Democrats in this election. Conversely, Biden's policies not only failed to regain support from minorities and working-class voters but appear to have further weakened it. According to a survey from the *New York Times* and Siena College from February 2024, only 18 % of voters said that Biden's policies had helped them personally.

Ultimately, perceptions appear to have carried more political weight than data, and the country's political divide—which tends to favor Republicans (Royo, 2025b)—has outweighed positive economic performance. A recent Brookings Institution report analyzes the growing divide between Democratic and Republican communities and how this divide has evolved since Trump's first presidency (Muro and Methkupal, 2024). The report shows that the US economy remains deeply divided geographically and that Trump's support base represents only 38 % of the national GDP, while Harris's represents 62 %. This outcome reflects the disproportionate political influence of rural areas within an economy that is concentrated in large metropolitan regions. According to the study:

Jobs in blue America depend disproportionately on investment in research and development, technological leadership, and service exports. By contrast, Republicans represent an economic base located in the country's struggling small towns and rural areas. Prosperity there remains out of reach for many, and the party sees little reason to take into account the priorities and needs of the nation's metropolitan centers.

These sharp economic divisions do not appear to provide a favorable context for the return of these voters to the Democratic

Party and suggest that the realignment may be long-lasting.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Another worrying factor for the Democratic Party and its prospects of regenerating the working-class vote is that politics is largely based on perceptions, and many American citizens perceive the Democratic Party as prioritizing the demands of progressive activists over the concerns of workers. One factor that has significantly damaged the Democratic Party among working-class voters is the increasingly entrenched perception that the party is radical, dominated by highly educated coastal elites, and out of touch with average Americans. A YouGov survey conducted for the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) (Marshall, Mattinson and Ainsley, 2024) assessing political parties on perceptions of trust and party commitment, reveals the negative views of the American working class toward the Democratic Party (p. 10). According to this survey, 74 % of voters reported being unhappy or dissatisfied with “how things are going in the country today” and 58 % of working-class voters expressed optimism about what a victory by Trump would mean for them. When asked which party they trusted “most to improve the economy, protect Americans from crime, and handle immigration”, a majority of respondents selected the Republican Party, with margins of 55 % to 34 % on the economy and 57 % to 29 % on immigration.

The poll also shows that the vast majority of respondents believe Democrats care more about promoting progressive social causes than defending the economic interests of working families. A majority of voters believed that Harris's campaign focused too much on irrelevant and “woke” issues with 49 % of voters and

53 % of those without a college degree believing that Democrats had gone too far in promoting a woke ideology. When asked to describe the party's top priorities, they chose abortion first and "LGBT/transgender policy" second. The Trump campaign successfully exploited these perceptions to attack Harris and portray the Democrats as a radical party that did not care about the needs and interests of the working people.

Other post-election polls confirm this negative perception of the Democratic Party. According to a survey by *The New York Times* and Ipsos, from January 2nd to 10th of 2025, when asked to identify the Democratic Party's top priorities, Americans most frequently mentioned abortion, the LGBTQ community, human rights, and climate change (see Table 1). Only 4 % of Americans included the LGBTQ community as a very important topic for them, but 31 % said that it was a priority for the Democratic Party. The same percentage of respondents identified abortion as a top priority for the Democratic Party, while only 13 % identified it as one of their top three personal concerns. The poll shows that the economy and inflation were clearly the top priorities for Americans. It also confirms that the country remains deeply divided over Trump's leadership, while suggesting that people do not view the Democratic Party as an attractive alternative.

According to another survey by Quinnipiac from January 2025, 31 % of voters held a favorable view of the Democratic Party, while 57 % held an unfavorable view. This represents the highest percentage of voters with an unfavorable opinion of the Democratic Party since the Quinnipiac University poll began asking this question. By contrast, 43 % of voters reported a favorable opinion of the Republican Party, while 45 % reported an unfavorable opinion. Once again, this is the highest percentage of voters holding a favorable opinion of the Republican Party since the Quinnipiac University poll began asking this question. The Gallup poll from February 2025 confirms this data. Few Democrats want their party to remain ideologically where it is and more favor a shift towards more moderate rather than more progressive orientation. Support for a more moderate Democratic Party among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents has increased 11 percentage points since 2021, reaching 45 %. At the same time, support for a more progressive party among Democrats and their supporters has decreased by five points, to 29 %.

CONCLUSIONS

This study points to the following analytical implications. First, the analysis suggests that an electoral victory should not

TABLE 1. *What Americans identified as the most important issues for each group*

Themselves	The Democratic Party	The Republican Party
The economy	Abortion	Immigration
Healthcare	LGBTIQ issues	The economy
Immigration	Climate change	Taxes
Taxes	The state of democracy	Guns
Crime	Healthcare	Abortion

Source: *The New York Times* and Ipsos.

be conflated with a durable political realignment, which is still in an early and uncertain phase. Despite Republican electoral success and the shift of segments of the working class away from the Democratic Party, a true political realignment would imply that one party secures a sustained electoral advantage over several decades.

Following this line of reasoning, it appears premature to conclude that a political realignment has taken place in the United States. As previously mentioned, the Republican victory was achieved by a narrow margin. It is unclear whether the observed shift in working-class support toward the Republican Party, as well as broader changes in the composition of the two coalitions, will prove durable.

Working-class alignment with the Republican Party appears contingent. If Republicans fail to translate their populist rhetoric into tangible material benefits for these groups, this alignment may prove reversible. Furthermore, Trump's margin of victory reinforces the view that the United States remains a deeply divided and highly competitive political system, where electoral volatility is high and relatively small shifts in vote share can determine control of power.

On the other hand, this analysis, fundamental to the two major parties, reveals a shift in the focus of political conflict and the start of a new era that may shape political agendas and conflicts. It is no longer primarily about wealth distribution or the traditional class struggle that defined the 20th-century industrial era. The new axis of conflict has moved toward nationalist populism versus cosmopolitan globalism. The agenda is now dominated by post-industrial issues such as sovereignty, national identity, border control, energy security, deregulation, and national sovereignty. Immigration and China have

replaced social security and trade unions as the main debate issues. This compels analysts to employ new theoretical tools that extend beyond simple left-right economic analysis.

Third, the election result highlights not only Republican electoral success, but also an ongoing transformation of the party. Trump's leadership of the party has led to a redefinition and a shift in its political platform toward conservative and nationalist populism, which entails the end of the old GOP's neoliberal consensus (favorable to free trade and foreign intervention). The Republican Party is now the vehicle for an ideology of "domestic production" and "protectionism". This has generated internal tension with traditional corporate elites who historically supported and financed the party, thereby altering its internal power structure. Rather than accidental, this change can be understood as part of the broader transition from an industrial economy to a service-based and digital one. This economic transformation has created a new class division based not only on income, but also on education level. The education gap has widened, and service and manufacturing workers feel alienated by the Democratic Party, which is now viewed as the party of urban, college-educated professionals. Thus, a reversal of roles has taken place with: Republicans attracting workers and Democrats attracting educated elites.

In short, a tentative final implication is that, although the durability of structural realignment remains uncertain given its lack of long-term consolidation, the era of industrial class politics appears to have ended. We are facing a new paradigm in which identity, nationhood, and responses to globalization are driving forces behind elections.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that this work focuses on the analysis of fac-

tors related to the 2024 election, such as post-pandemic inflation. A decades-long structural study is vital to confirm the tentative implications of this analysis. Future research could move beyond this historical-structural approach toward more detailed empirical work that conceptualizes the working class not as a “bloc”, but instead as a heterogeneous category with significant ethnic and geographic variation, and that examines the potential reconfiguration of political conflict away from a simple rural–urban axis toward working-class suburbs and post-industrial cities. It is also necessary to confirm whether the educational gap is the new dividing line (more than income); to study the impact of identity and culture versus material interests; to analyze the institutionalization of pro-Trump labor politics and the transformation of the Republican Party into a multi-ethnic, working-class party; and, finally, to examine the Democratic Party’s response, particularly whether it will undergo reform or further entrenchment.

The dilemma faced by the Democratic Party is clear: identity has displaced class, and with it, the support of the average worker has been lost. If the party seeks to counter the rise of right-wing populism, it is not sufficient to acknowledge identity politics alone; it must offer an agenda that is capable of generating material security and solidarity (Royo, 2025b). This means re-emphasizing its traditional focus on protecting the vulnerable while fostering forms of collective belonging that enhance social cohesion. Recognizing this reality may be the only means of guiding the party out of the political wasteland in which it finds itself.

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